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ABSTRACT

This document describes a distance career counseling program developed over several years by a multidisciplinary team of career counseling, technology, and business development experts. The program, called ReadyMinds, provides personalized distance career counseling to a range of clients: undergraduate and graduate students as well as alumni seeking to make career changes. The counselors employ a proprietary methodology and a structured program that maximize the use of real world resources. ReadyMinds helps clients focus on their current and future career planning and provides them with concrete career development strategies to help them achieve their goals. The program differs from open-ended counseling relationships in that it is a need-based approach focusing on more immediate goals. It is structured to allow both client and counselor to move quickly towards developing a plan of action. This document chronicles the development of the program, and depicts the services provided to a typical client. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/ADT)

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The Evolution of a Distance Career Counseling Model: Implications for Training, Practice and Supervision of Cybercounselors

by

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Chapter Eight

The Evolution of a Distance Career Counseling Model: Implications for Training, Practice and Supervision of Cybercounselors

James F. Malone, Karen S. Miller, and Randy M. Miller

Distance Career Counseling Program Overview

The distance career counseling program described herein was developed over several years by a multidisciplinary team of career counseling, technology and business development experts assembled by the authors who are the primary figures in the New York City-based organization known as ReadyMinds (www.readyminds.com). It is exciting to describe the current state of ReadyMinds as it exists at this writing (Fall 2001) since it reflects the fruits of our labor after many years of discussion and preliminary applications. Our program has been fully operational for one calendar year, but it is a continuous work-in-progress.

The field of distance and cybercareer counseling is evolving quickly, and ReadyMinds continually updates the program to incorporate knowledge gained from research and practice. This chapter examines and addresses issues facing cybercounselors, cybertrainers and cybersupervisors who have been actively involved in the design and delivery of the ReadyMinds program.

ReadyMinds provides personalized distance career counseling to a range of clients: undergraduate and graduate students as well as alumni seeking to make career changes. Our counselors employ a proprietary methodology and a structured program that maximize the use of real world resources. ReadyMinds helps clients focus on their current and future career planning and provides them with concrete career development strategies to help them achieve their goals. The program differs from open-ended counseling relationships in that it is a need-based approach focusing on more immediate goals. It is structured to allow both client and counselor to move quickly towards developing a plan of action.

The beginning of this chapter will depict the services provided to a typical ReadyMinds client. The following presentation is not intended to describe clinical or case issues, but merely to†illustrate the ReadyMinds process.

Imagine for a moment a male college student named Zach. He is home for the summer and working as a lifeguard. He wonders to himself, "When am I going to be able to get a REAL job? I'm getting pretty bored with this lifestyle." He thinks, "I know that I should be doing something to plan for my future, but when I'm at school I'm so busy that I never have time to consider what I will do after graduation. I can't even figure out my major let alone what I really want to do." One night he is at home surfing the Internet and he comes across ReadyMinds.com. He reads through the information presented and thinks, "Hey, maybe I don't have to wait until I get back to school in the fall to start some career planning." He talks to his parents about the fee and decides to register for career counseling through ReadyMinds (please see www.readyminds.com for an example of the registration process and current fee structure).

The journey has begun. Zach registers for the ReadyMinds program by choosing a login name and password. He then fills out demographic information. While registering, he is asked to read and agree to the ReadyMinds *Terms and Conditions of Use*, *Privacy Policy*, *Code of Ethics*, and *Client Waiver*. This task ensures Zach the opportunity to make an "Informed Consent" decision about the career counseling relationship to which he is committing. Once Zach has registered, he is asked to fill out the ReadyMinds *General Survey*, a comprehensive set of questions intended to help the ReadyMinds career counselor to obtain insights and background about Zach before the counseling begins. Zach also completes a standardized career assessment tool that has been validated for Internet use. This phase of the process allows the counselor to obtain valuable information regarding the client's expressed, measured, and manifest interests, skills, and values. Registration and assessment will take Zach approximately one hour to complete.

Imagine now that all of this information is floating around in cyberspace. To relieve any concerns about security, the ReadyMinds program uses a secure server that protects Zach's information from being readily available to any hacker on the Internet. The ReadyMinds Director of Career Counseling peruses Zach's profile and chooses the best ReadyMinds career counselor match from our current database of career counselors who have a National Certified Counselor (NCC) credential from the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). These ReadyMinds career counselors have completed a 15-hour training course that prepares

them to use their career counseling skills in a distance counseling model. The Director of Counseling chooses "Lisa" to work with Zach as his ReadyMinds career counselor because she has extensive experience working with college students who have yet to declare a major.

Lisa now has access to a wealth of preliminary information that will help her to anticipate Zach's needs before the actual counseling sessions begin. The process of developing rapport in this cybercounseling scenario now begins. Lisa has been trained in writing, research and assessment techniques to help establish rapport with Zach via e-mail. A powerful example of this communication is the ReadyMinds *Welcome E-mail* that suggests to Zach future areas for counseling discussion and describes the logistics for setting up the first session. Consequently, before Zach and Lisa even have phone contact, the working alliance has been initiated.

Next stop: Zach and Lisa "meet" over the phone. Through e-mail, Zach and Lisa have already arranged a mutually convenient time for their first telephone career counseling session. The first session usually lasts approximately 60 minutes. The ReadyMinds program provides clients with a total of 120 minutes of telecounseling time. During these 120 minutes, Zach and Lisa will complete a qualitative verbal assessment to further identify Zach's needs, strengths, preferences and values. These 120 minutes are usually broken down into two separate one-hour counseling sessions. The time in between sessions (in this case 3 weeks) is tailored to Zach's individual needs and reflects time needed to complete "career homework" as well as external factors such as exams and vacation schedules. Some clients prefer to have two 30-minute counseling contacts after the initial one-hour session. ReadyMinds career counselors are trained to assess how best to utilize the time available depending upon the unique needs of each client.

The ReadyMinds career counseling methodology is based on a compilation of traditional and distance counseling research. Lisa will apply a loosely structured verbal protocol and intentional education model to help Zach focus on motivation and goal setting. Zach's needs will determine where the initial focus of the counseling is placed. ReadyMinds views the career development process as being composed of specific steps that are interrelated and recursive. These four steps are to be viewed as a continuum and it is possible that Zach and Lisa might address issues that cross over from one to another during the course of an interview. However, it is helpful for the sake of focus to delineate these points of emphasis in the ReadyMinds career planning process. The following outline represents the approach to career planning: Self-assessment, Exploration, Decision-Making, and Self-Marketing.

Along this journey, Zach might need to make a stop to ask for directions. For example, in between his first and his second career counseling sessions with Lisa, he may think of an important question. As part of the ReadyMinds Program, Zach can e-mail his career counselor at any time with brief inquiries or requests. Hopefully, the answers to these questions will keep him from getting too lost in the forest.

Both during the counseling and upon the completion of the 120 minutes, Zach and Lisa will have outlined specific goals for Zach to address. However, it is also important that Zach has learned the four steps of the career planning process and can continue to apply these steps as they apply uniquely to his future career management. To reinforce this learning, the ReadyMinds career counselor prepares a 3-4 page written communication that is called *Insight Into U*™. This document is a personalized counseling summary that is intended to motivate and inspire Zach to continue working on his career plans. Additionally, this communication highlights Zach's career development process, provides feedback onhis career assessment and outlines the agreed upon goals and tasks for the future.*Insight Into U*™ is published on Zach's *MyReadyMinds*™ web site page that he accesses with his user name and password.

Zach's journey is far from complete; in fact, it is probably closer to the beginning than the end. Since ReadyMinds recognizes that Zach is likely to have many more questions along the way, Lisa will provide him with a list of important resources. Since Zach is a college student, it will be suggested that he explore the services available at his career services center. However, he will also be able to e-mail Lisa with brief questions for a full year. If Zach is interested in pursuing additional career counseling, he may take his *Insight Into U*™ to a career counselor on his campus or in his geographical area to serve as a guide or he may choose to continue to work with Lisa (for an additional fee).

Since many of the readers have a counseling background, we will address some of the additional components of the ReadyMinds program that are "invisible" to Zach. Lisa needs to effectively organize all of the information she has obtained from Zach in order to help him with his career plan. ReadyMinds has developed a unique system of note-taking that assists with this process. After each career counseling session, Lisa is expected to make specific notations regarding areas that she has covered in the qualitative developmental-contextualist assessment. This will not only help her to prepare for future sessions with Zach, but sets the stage for crafting *Insight Into U*™. ReadyMinds career counselors have access to experienced supervisors if they need assistance with any phase of the career counseling process. Supervisors provide support through telephone and e-mail

communications. It is also appropriate to mention that ReadyMinds serves the needs of a wide variety of individuals that include: graduate students, alumni, continuing education students and career changers. These clients will register for the ReadyMinds program and will undergo the same counseling and assessment services experienced by Zach.

Chronological Development of the Program

Since 1997 ReadyMinds Founder and Chairman, Randy Miller, has worked together with career counseling, technology and business experts to develop a systematically delivered, high quality distance career counseling program to undergraduate and graduate college students as well as to alumni who are seeking to make career changes. He and his staff have focused on designing an integrated and personalized model of distance career counseling services that address the four steps in the career counseling process mentioned earlier. Counselor-assisted *assessment* of client interests, skills, values and contextual dynamics increases the individual's self-awareness. This insightful information guides appropriate research and *exploration* that help clients to employ informed *decision making* with respect to both educational and employment options. Where appropriate, strategies are planned so clients may engage in successful *self-marketing*. The ReadyMinds career counselor's role within this process includes providing insight, support and motivation by combining the best practices of traditional career counseling with carefully crafted and continuously evaluated distance career counseling interventions.

One of the factors that set ReadyMinds apart from other career counseling services is its use of technology. ReadyMinds' specific approach combines telecounseling with Internet-supported assessment and communication. Career counseling literature has been addressing computer-assisted guidance and career information dissemination systems for many years. More recently, the journals and additional publications have addressed cybercounseling as a newly developed specialty within the counseling field [e.g. Bloom & Walz (2000); *Journal of Career Assessment*, Vol. 8, (Winter, 2000). Harris-Bowlsbey, Riley Dikel, & Sampson (1998)]. Most of the literature has focused on philosophical, ethical, legal and efficacy issues while citing examples of initial pilot and exploratory ventures into this new field.

Indeed, the first edition of *Cybercounseling and Cyberlearning* summed up several "knowledge generalizations" (Walz, 2000, p.405) which urged a need for more research and suggested that the "caution and reservation" (Walz, 2000, p.407) applicable to distance learning ought to

be applied to cybercounseling as well. Admonitions centered on the power of the Internet as a learning resource, albeit one not unlike the "Wild West" (Walz, 2000, p.407). Care must be taken to help learners and clients to develop effective computer skills. Especially inviting was the suggestion that cybercounseling might augment rather than replace traditional counseling. In a sense, the former could provide a context for qualitative research projects that will inform both innovative program design and promising guidelines for more rigorous empirical research studies about the effectiveness of cybercounseling.

Walz (2000) stressed the power of equitable information access through cyber resources and the counselor's role in brokering clients' abilities to find and use this knowledge towards achieving greater self-esteem and freedom, certainly two of the main goals we associate with effective counseling. Perhaps the most challenging point in this "summing up" section of the first edition was the call for counselors to "move out of the box" (Walz, 2000, p.410) in terms of learning what the outcomes of cybercounseling would be as new techniques and applications were made in working with clients within distance-based programs. The joining of cyberlearning and cybercounseling refers not only to the distinct activity of gaining knowledge, but also to helping clients effect positive changes in their lives. In an extended sense, as counselors engage in cybercounseling, they experience the need for retraining and new forms of supervision with regard to practice. What are the effects of engaging in cybercounseling for both counselor and client? How will practice further inform new training and supervision? What are the advantages and limitations of distance cybertraining? These generalizations further point out the implications for global and multicultural cooperation as well as joining the forces of counseling to related fields through the synergistic use of technology. The first edition's closing prediction is both powerful and futuristic. We know that cybercounseling is here to stay as a force within the field. While we adopt a commitment to its inevitability, we remain "half-sure" (Walz, 2000, p. 413), so that we may engage in the appropriate research to inform ourselves more accurately about it's efficacies and limitations.

In the spirit of allowing these "knowledge generalizations" to guide our work, the entire ReadyMinds team, made up of committed professionals from the fields of career counseling, technology, and business, have been working together to create, deliver, and evaluate the ReadyMinds distance career counseling program. The following pages examine the building of the ReadyMinds model and concurrently evaluate the effectiveness of its delivery by focusing on the emerging issues experienced by practitioners,

trainers, supervisors, technical support staff, business managers and most importantly, clients.

Program Milestones

In 1997, when we began to formulate the program, several questions loomed. Who would our clients be? What would be their needs and which concrete career counseling services would best meet those needs? How would we source and train our career counselors? As a private company, how could we negotiate entry into the professional counseling world with credibility and acceptance? The following milestones represent important planning and implementation events significant in the development of the company.

PROGRAM MILESTONES

Date	Milestone
1997-Present	**Development of the *Career Counselor Training Manual*** - The Director and Assistant Director of Career Counseling began the preparation of a 15-chapter document outlining the rationale and procedures for the delivery of the ReadyMinds *Career Counseling Program*. The manual has been revised at several critical points in the development of the ReadyMinds program. Input and detailed evaluation have been received from several national career development experts.
1998-Present	**ReadyMinds Executive Committee** – This group provides a team effort to guide ReadyMinds on all strategic aspects of business and program development/delivery. It was assembled from a selected group of individuals who bring many years of business experience from various disciplines including marketing, finance, promotion/publicity and strategic planning. The group meets on a semi-annual basis and communicates on an as-needed basis.
July - August 1998	**Summer Case Study Program** - The objective of this pilot project was to field-test the ReadyMinds individualized approach to distance career counseling. Eighteen college students

	representing the ReadyMinds target market participated in the program and completed the entire course of counseling that was delivered by the Director and Assistant Director of Career Counseling. Students completed satisfaction surveys requesting a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the program. Exit interviews were conducted with participants to obtain additional detailed information about their overall experience with the program.
Jan - Dec. 1999	**Development of *Distance Career Counseling Model*** - Continued research and development highlighted the benefits of using a distance model to deliver ReadyMinds career counseling services. Already existing data suggested that clients would find telecounseling effective and convenient. Use of the Internet and e-mail would make it possible to hire a diverse pool of career counselors who could work from home-offices during times of their choosing.
April 2000	**Legal Code Development Process Begins** - ReadyMinds developed *Terms and Conditions of Use*, *Privacy Policy*, *Release of Information Waiver* and *Client Waiver* to ensure clients' informed consent about the use of ReadyMinds programs and services. Legal consultation continues to be obtained in order to ensure ReadyMinds' adherence to applicable laws and ethical codes.
May 2000	**First ReadyMinds'*Career Counselor Training*'** - Career counselors with national counselor certification from NBCC were trained to deliver the ReadyMinds program. Career counselors were recruited through referrals from colleagues and an advertisement in *Counseling Today* (monthly publication by the American Counseling Association).

June - December 2000	**ReadyMinds Soft Launch –** ReadyMinds offered its Career Counseling Program to a limited number of clients. This was an opportunity for our new counselors to deliver the distance model and it allowed potential collegiate partners to gain exposure to our services.
June 2000 - Present	**Technical Assistance Board** - National experts in the fields of career counseling, cybercounseling, career assessment and counselor supervision continue to work closely with the ReadyMinds career counseling, management and technical staffs in order to provide critical feedback as well as recommendations for program development and counselor training. This input reflects ReadyMinds' commitment to self-analysis as a means of delivering the highest quality services to our clients.
July 2000	**Partnership with Psychological Assessment Resources (PAR)** - In order to administer a well-validated career assessment tool via the Internet, ReadyMinds forged a partnership with PAR so that clients could take the Self-Directed Search© (SDS). When ReadyMinds clients take the SDS it appears as if they have never left the ReadyMinds website. There is no additional fee to the user for this assessment.
August 2000-Present	**ReadyMinds *Advisory Board*** - Since its inception ReadyMinds has sought to collaborate with and add value to the already existing professional career counseling services that exist on college and university campuses. Understandably the educational community is protective of its own valuable services and

	cautious about private companies who approach students to offer similar or related services. In order to familiarize the professional collegiate career development community with the caliber of ReadyMinds career counseling as well as to explore possible avenues of collaboration, the company initiated the formation of a focus group that eventually became our advisory board. This group, composed of top directors of career services from across the country, meets annually and communicates frequently on an as-needed basis. Emphasis is placed on ReadyMinds' offering of differentiated services to students and alumni that reflect each university's specific needs. Appropriately designed service menus and delivery structures enable each institution to decide how it would like to use the ReadyMinds program.
January 2001-Present	**School Partnership Launch and Implementation** –ReadyMinds administrative and marketing staffs confer with representatives of career services from various colleges and universities in order to explore collaborative relationships. Various avenues for joint efforts are explored: co-branding with career centers, private label arrangements, licensing fee for student service or product use, complementary supplemental services and private funding.
February 2001	**Human Resource Focus Group** – Committee of HR specialists from the business community shares ideas with ReadyMinds staff to explore the role industry can play in supporting and benefiting from clients who go through the ReadyMinds *Career Counseling Program.*
March 2001	**Career Counselor Training Program Receives NBCC Approval** – After a rigorous review of all aspects of the ReadyMinds *Career Counseling and Counselor Training Program,*

April 2001	NBCC grants approval to ReadyMinds as a continuing education provider. **Parent Focus Group** - ReadyMinds administrative and marketing staffs meet with parent focus group in order to discuss service models and develop offerings that will assist parents as their sons and daughters work their way through the career decision-making process in college.
April 2001	**Second ReadyMinds Career Counselor Training** – Additional certified counselors complete the ReadyMinds training program, receive their NBCC continuing education hours, and begin administering their training cases under supervision.
May – June 2001	**Response at the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employees), SUNY (State Universities of New York), and EACE (Eastern Association of Colleges and Employees) Conferences** – As exhibitors at each of the above mentioned conferences, ReadyMinds received an overwhelming response and heavy traffic flow. Visitors were enthusiastic about utilizing the ReadyMinds program, not only for their undergraduate population, but for other sectors as well (i.e., graduate students, alumni, continuing education). Several introductions have since led to partnerships within the ReadyMinds *Collegiate Network*.
July 2001	**Third ReadyMinds Career Counselor Training**

The Program and How It Is Delivered

Earlier in this chapter, the case of Zach was discussed to illustrate the current ReadyMinds career counseling process. In sum, ReadyMinds

delivers distance career counseling using a proprietary methodology that offers a structured program maximizing the use of real world resources. The program is designed to help our clients focus on current and future career planning needs and to provide concrete career development strategies to help them achieve their goals. The ReadyMinds process delivers 120 minutes of personalized career counseling via telephone that includes validated Internet-delivered assessment and online contact with a National Certified Counselor. Counseling feedback is provided to each individual and is integrated within a uniquely written summary called *Insight Into U*™.

The rationale for delivering ReadyMinds services in this manner will be discussed here. Adaptations in delivery have occurred throughout the process. For example, during the *Summer Case Study Program*, clients had to complete a *General Survey* via the U.S. mail or fax. All communications between client and counselor occurred by telephone, including scheduling appointment times. These completion methods were cumbersome and suffered from poor turn-around time. ReadyMinds administrative staff frequently had to follow-up with clients to request the return of information. Counselors found it frustrating since it often took multiple phone calls to make contact with a client. Consequently, ReadyMinds recognized the need to integrate a more efficient client-counselor communication system into its model. Using a password-based website and e-mail addressed some of the challenges in working with this population. Clients with irregular hours tend to access their e-mail more frequently than their telephone answering machines. Most ReadyMinds career counselors are independent contractors who work from their homes or home offices. Consequently, communicating by e-mail helps the counselor to maintain a measure of privacy.

We recognize that a distance counseling model is not applicable to all candidates for career counseling. It will be important for ReadyMinds to continually evaluate its impact on clients. The following questions should be considered important for future research and practice: What types of clients and/or problems seem to be served most effectively in a distance model? Does ReadyMinds provide services for clients who may not avail themselves of traditional career counseling services? Once clients have completed a course of distance career counseling are they more likely in the future to seek out additional counseling services (traditional or distance) when needed?

Our Client Population and Their Needs

At this writing, the ReadyMinds program has provided career counseling services to and gathered documented data from over 100 clients

from twenty-two different states. The following describes some of the population demographics of ReadyMinds clients and includes a summary of the most salient needs and characteristics of our current population.

Close to three-quarters of ReadyMinds clients are female. This gender difference closely matches recent trends in college enrollment as well as the typical population which requests counseling services (Good & Wood, 2000). ReadyMinds serves an ethnically diverse clientele. Currently, 63% of ReadyMinds clients†have been Caucasian, 11% African-American, 9% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 4% Multiracial, and 1% American Indian (7% didn't report ethnicity). The geographic and ethnic span of our population indicates the need for ReadyMinds career counselors to be well trained in multicultural issues. Consequently, in its hiring practices, we attempt to locate career counselors from diverse backgrounds in order to best serve our clientele.

In order to understand some of the lifespan and developmental issues facing our clients, it is important to acknowledge their ages and education levels. Most of our clients are in their late teens or early twenties, however our client base ranges in age from 17-57. Over half of our clients are in their junior or senior year in college. A little over a quarter are freshmen or sophomores. Thirteen percent are in graduate school or have a graduate degree and five percent are in high school.

As previously mentioned, we view career development as a continuous process reflecting the steps of self-assessment, exploration, decision-making and self-marketing. ReadyMinds asks clients to rank order these needs. Our population selected *Exploration* as the highest career development need. The vast majority of our clients stated that they needed assistance with obtaining information about different career directions that would match their interests, skills and values. A close second included learning strategies for networking and information interviewing. This research suggests that while we serve a large number of juniors and seniors, these are individuals who continue to feel a need for assistance with the "nuts and bolts" of exploring career fields. In fact, this is the skill set in which most career counselors feel they are uniquely qualified.

The college/graduate school majors of our clients are as diverse as our clientele. We have clients majoring in everything from health care management to culinary arts. However, a few courses of study more highly represented include: Business/Finance/Marketing/Economics (31%), Communications/Visual/Performing Arts (17%), and Psychology/ Counseling (13%). Knowledge of the most common courses of study helps us to effectively train, supervise and hire ReadyMinds career counselors.

The ReadyMinds *Career Counseling Program* is compact and concise, but it also attempts to obtain extensive information about contextual factors

that affect an individual's career development. Career counselors generally find it useful to have information about parental background. In this area, our client population tends to be more homogenous. While a small percentage of our clients' parents are scattered through technical trades and clerical/administrative areas, the vast majority of our clientele's parents are college-educated professionals working in the fields of service, technology and business.

In order to more fully understand our clients' unique career development needs, we also attempt to understand internal and external career barriers, i.e., factors that might impede an individual's career success. Not surprisingly, barriers range from concerns about lacking specific skills, to needing money and financial aid, to having difficulty in a changing job market. However, a number of common internal barriers emerged among this population: self-confidence, general fear, fear of public speaking, confusion, inability to focus, and low motivation. Some of these barriers could be effectively incorporated into short term career counseling, while others clearly required additional counseling above and beyond the 120 minutes provided by the ReadyMinds program. Our career counselors must be skilled in quickly assessing whether any of these barriers are interfering with effective career counseling. If so, career counselors are required to refer these clients for personal counseling outside of the ReadyMinds program.

This provides a glimpse of ReadyMinds clients and what they hope to gain from career counseling. In turn, ReadyMinds career counselors expect that clients are available for scheduled career counseling sessions, are responsive to e-mails, and are engaged in the career counseling process. These factors will be more fully discussed in the sections on Ethical and Legal Guidelines and Difficult Situations.

Knowledge of our population demographics invites important questions for future research and practice. For example, are clients with certain types of majors more likely to seek distance career counseling services? Are various ethnic minority groups more comfortable pursuing the option of distance counseling than traditional face-to-face counseling? Does the relative anonymity of distance counseling encourage clients to seek assistance with career development earlier or later in their college career?

Career Counselor Population

Backgrounds, Competencies, Roles and Responsibilities

From the outset of designing the ReadyMinds program, our commitment to having the highest quality of counseling services for our clients guided the selection and preparation of our counseling staff. What criteria would guide us in choosing this select group? We determined that the minimum prerequisites for our career counselors would include a Master's degree in counseling, national certification by the National Board for Certified Counselors and a minimum of three years of supervised career counseling with individuals whose needs were similar to those of our clients. The National Certified Counselor (NCC) credential was especially important since we judged it to be the highest industry standard for our profession, and its attainment ensures the educational and experiential components we held to be important. Currently there are approximately 35,000 NCCs.

Additional consideration of our distance counseling model suggested that our counselors had to possess well-developed technology skills and effective verbal and writing skills since so much of our delivery system relies on these communication competencies. Considering the importance of motivation, goal-setting and targeted outcomes within the ReadyMinds program, we sought individuals with the attitudinal and organizational competence to deliver career counseling in a highly specialized and proprietary delivery system. Finally, the ability to handle a caseload skillfully and under a distance supervision model became a valued characteristic of our counselors.

Our current staff consists of 22 highly trained and experienced career counseling professionals from 11 states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas. The majority is currently working within the career development community at various colleges and universities.

How do we match up our clients and counselors for optimal case assignment? While they are all well trained career development professionals with highly developed skills in all phases of career counseling, we also engage in a differentiated staffing/specialty model of case assignment. For example, some of our counselors are experienced in assisting business or technical career-oriented students while others are more experienced working with clients whose special learning needs impact career decision-making. In making case assignments, the director and assistant director take these particular counselor competencies into account.

Questions often arise with regard to our counselors' business relationship with the company. Our counselors work for the company as

independent contractors and their involvement is viewed as an additional professional responsibility that is handled outside of their employment hours and beyond commitments to their current employers. Some issues related to conflict of interest have initially arisen but in all cases our counselors have been able to work out these concerns. In most cases, our counselors' employers are aware of their relationship with ReadyMinds. In general, our counselors agree that they will not counsel any current or former students/clients who are associated with the institutions where they are currently employed. It has been gratifying that the professional quality and high ethical standards of the ReadyMinds program are recognized and respected within the career development community. Several colleges have developed an interest in the *Career Counseling Program* as a result of one of their staff member's involvement.

The Career Counselor Training Program

How did we respond to the challenge of training already experienced career professionals in our proprietary method? Hours of discussion and team efforts resulted in the initial decision to create the *Career Counselor Training Manual*. Our intent was to write not only a clear and comprehensive outline of our career counseling model but also to craft a curriculum for training our counselors to master and deliver a distance career counseling program. This publication outlines the rationale and procedures for the delivery of the *Career Counseling Program.* The manual has been revised at several critical points in our program development, usually in response to issues encountered in practice. Manual content addresses training and practice concerns discussed throughout this chapter. These issues include: the ReadyMinds philosophy and proprietary model of distance career counseling, human resources topics within ReadyMinds, theoretical and research support for our career counseling model, counseling products and services, and finally, supervision and evaluation.

The *Career Counselor Training Program* meets for 15 hours on two consecutive days at the New York City corporate offices. This face-to-face learning event makes use of the case study method with ample discussion time built into various presentations. Our training team is composed of the director and assistant director of counseling as well as our technical staff. Our current model was redesigned from two previous training programs that took place in different formats. Initially we met with trainees in a four session model: two extended evening meetings joined to two full Saturday sessions over a 6-8 week period. Getting busy professionals together provides for challenging logistics, and we initially felt the use of evenings and weekends would be more convenient. However, we found the flow

and synergy of the training could be increased by structuring it into a consecutive two-day model. Admittedly, there is a great deal of material to be covered and assimilated in such a concentrated time period. We are pleased with the current format but are still exploring additional ways of easing the informational flow to the trainees. We already send out a substantial pre-training document a week to ten days prior to training. We are considering the possibility of including additional "up front" materials that could be worked on prior to the actual training session. ReadyMinds is also exploring the design and delivery of training using a distance learning model. Every newly trained ReadyMinds career counselor completes a training case under supervision immediately following the training sessions. No actual cases are assigned until the completion of the training case.

All training materials and delivery systems are carefully evaluated by trainees and internal staff with the intent of constantly upgrading the effectiveness of the program. ReadyMinds training carries with it 15 hours of approved continuing education credit towards the renewal of the NBCC certification credential and we maintain all records as per the NBCC Approved Continuing Education Provider Policies and Guidelines.

Ethical and Legal Guidelines: How ReadyMinds Conducts Business

From the outset of designing the ReadyMinds *Career Counseling Model*, adherence to the highest level of ethical and legal behavior in the interest of our clients and colleagues has guided our actions. As a private company offering career counseling services to individuals associated with the educational community, we want to create high expectations for client as well as counselor behavior. The challenges of prospecting for counseling talent and attracting clients to our program carry an imperative to conduct ourselves from an informed legal and ethical base. This need is especially profound since we are traveling relatively new terrain, or to repeat Walz's metaphor, the "Wild West" of the Internet.

With respect to ethical guidelines, we immediately established a ReadyMinds *Counselor Code of Ethics* that embraced the NBCC Code of Ethics and The Standards for the Ethical Practice of WebCounseling. ReadyMinds career counselors sign an ethical code statement that commits them to place client needs at the forefront of practice. This code also clearly delineates their responsibility to observe the differences between developmental career counseling and more clinical types of counseling. Our training program goes into great detail in order to illustrate this distinction, and it demonstrates how to handle sensitive issues such as

making a referral for psychotherapy or intervening in "harm to self or others" emergencies.

From the client side, we also felt that it was necessary to elicit a signed agreement that provides informed consent to those who receive career counseling from ReadyMinds. The ReadyMinds *Client Code of Ethics* is a very detailed statement that clearly defines the scope and nature of the career counseling provided in the ReadyMinds program. Clients agree to respect the privacy and proprietary rights of the company as well as to uphold their own responsibilities. These duties include: being available for appointments at assigned times and conducting themselves as mature, socially responsible adults throughout their relationship with ReadyMinds. Not unlike traditional face-to face counseling, some clients miss appointments or fall by the wayside. Although it is a relatively small percentage of our clients (approximately 11%), we make a strong and concerted effort to reengage them back into the program.

Extended contact with our company's legal advisors also resulted in a detailed *Privacy Policy* and *Terms and Conditions* Section on our website. The latter contains a direct link to the NBCC website in the event that clients want to ask questions about the content and delivery of the career counseling we provide.

An additional example of commitment to client privacy is how we handle *Directory Information* that refers to identifying data such as addresses and phone numbers. Many institutions consider this information "fair game" for distribution to third parties and will exercise this option unless a student "opts out" and tells the institution not to share the data. ReadyMinds offers the opposite. Upon registration we inform our clients that they must "opt in" if they approve of their information being passed along to a third party. Unless they do so, ReadyMinds will not share their directory information with any third party. We have also created a *Release of Information Authorization* form in case a client would like some type of career counseling report to go to a third party such as a career services counselor on campus. A *Parental Consent Form* is required in the case of a client who is not yet 18 years of age.

Significant planning went into a legal agreement addressing human resources issues that is signed by each newly trained counselor and the CEO. This document offers protection to both sides with regard to proprietary information, non-disclosure/non-compete agreements, compensation, workflow expectations, professional liability insurance and a wide variety of other important issues. Since our career counselors work as independent contractors, the company assists their access to professional liability insurance through the ACA Insurance Trust. However, they must

pay for this and other work related expenses since the company is not permitted to offer them benefits. A significant component of the ReadyMinds *Training Program* is devoted to clarifying these mutual obligations and responsibilities. In all discussions both sides have maintained a very professional and respectful attitude in doing business with each other for the benefit of our clients. Clarification of the business relationship has been beneficial since many counselors have not had extensive experience working outside the educational community.

Collaboration with Colleagues: Adding Value to Existing Services

Offices of career development in academia clearly offer well-organized and comprehensive programs of career planning to their students and other constituents. Indeed the director and assistant director are career academics that have spent more than 40 years as counselors and counselor educators in higher education. At the same time, we are very aware of the current and emerging needs for certain learners to access distance career counseling services. Examples are individuals who would enjoy the convenience of this counseling outside the times when it is usually available via traditional business hours. Certainly alumni, continuing education students, and distance learners can also profit from our service. Individuals who live in remote locations where easy access is not available comprise another group.

The Internet revolution has also spawned a population that both enjoys and prefers the communication style which distance career counseling provides. Considering the tens of thousands of websites offering career information, research data, and job posting access, it makes sense to offer supplementary counseling services that integrate and hold the process together for individuals as they attempt to wade through the many options available in the cyber landscape. Whenever a client is a college student, ReadyMinds counselors make it a practice to visit the web site of that university's career services office. They also refer these clients to that career services office and web site at several points during the career counseling process. This type of referral and reinforcement is just one example of how ReadyMinds seeks to add value to already existing services.

The challenge of gaining a respected and accepted position within the college career counseling space has been both delicate and exhilarating. Over a four-year period, the founder and management team have made a conscious commitment to serve this community and its constituents. Through its work with our advisory board, composed of ten directors representing college and university career services from across the country, as well as by joining NACE and attending its national conference,

ReadyMinds has successfully developed a collaborative relationship with the career services community. We are currently offering our program to individuals from several colleges and universities and intend to focus our services towards those populations that will benefit most from a value added resource.

Luzzo (2000) presents statistics about the changing demographics of today's college population. He cites references indicating that many current students (undergraduates and graduates) are returning adults over 25 years of age. These individuals typically have not been enrolled in a formal educational system in many years. Furthermore, Luzzo (1999) suggests that this "adult" population will probably continue to grow and expand over the next several years. Our advisory board feels that many college and university career counseling programs focus almost exclusively on the needs of traditional-aged undergraduate students. However, recent demographic trends indicate a need to respond to the expanding returning adult student population (Luzzo, 2000). The ReadyMinds program is in a unique position to serve this growing population as well as alumni and distance learners.

Various partnership or vendor relations models have been discussed such as "co-branding" or "private labeling." We also seek to broker communication between our clients and their campus career services counselors in those instances where clients would like to receive follow-up counseling from this source. In all cases, we recommend in our counseling summary to our clients that they also explore campus-based career counseling and the career services web site of the institution they attend as we seek to establish and maintain a degree of professional service and positive vendor relations with other career services professionals within the educational sector.

Distance Career Counseling and Technology Services and Products

Our distance career counseling incorporates telephone counseling supported by e-mail and our web site. Clients have access to a personal web page, called *MyReadyMinds™* that can be updated by the career counselor as clients navigate their way through the career development process.

These unique forms of communicating with clients are a natural result of the logistical realities surrounding our program as we serve clients from a wide geographic span (currently, anywhere in the United States). In the past, telecounseling was typically offered to individuals who would otherwise be unable to receive counseling because of living in a remote

location, disability, or lack of access (Coman, Burrows, & Evans, 2001). However, having the ability to obtain career counseling services by telephone also adds a level of convenience for many individuals. Some university based career centers are not open evenings, weekends or during college recess, typically the time when clients may be available to receive services. Many ReadyMinds career counselors are interested in working with clients during "off hours" since this arrangement allows them to continue to earn additional income while maintaining current employment or family responsibilities.

The telephone was selected as the medium to deliver career counseling after carefully considering the relevant research. Previous studies found the types of concerns that typically occur during career counseling could likely be effectively managed through telephone counseling (Day & Schneider, 2000). Research has also demonstrated that the telephone has been successfully used to provide a number of differently structured counseling programs (Rosenfield, 1997). Consequently, we recognized the benefit of creating an organized, structured career counseling program in order to maximize the chances of successful career counseling outcomes. Coman, Burrows & Evans (2001) suggest that preplanning of sessions, and if necessary, e-mailing material in advance of the counseling session will be helpful. We have pre-planning automatically built into our program and a career counselor can easily direct a student to view information on the Internet prior to a counseling session through the use of technology built into our web site.

Counseling by telephone has a number of significant benefits. Increased client access to services has already been mentioned. The relative anonymity of telephone counseling can be an important advantage. For example, clients who are well known in a small community may have difficulty feeling comfortable seeking face-to-face counseling locally (Coman, Burrows, & Evans, 2001). It has been found that certain clients may be reluctant to divulge certain types of problems in person. However, the telephone often provides clients with a perception of distance and safety that allows them to more quickly reveal their true concerns (Day & Schneider, 2000; Rosenfield, 1997). For example, our career counselors often find that clients are more willing to discuss occupational daydreams that may not be "acceptable" to authority figures in their lives. This generally leads to a fruitful discussion of work values, nontraditional career paths and overall life planning.

Rosenfield (1997) describes many of the skills and attitudes needed for effective telephone counseling and we have incorporated these into the *Career Counselor Training Program*. Some characteristics include: having

a highly interactive type of counseling style which includes responding quickly, briefly and frequently; building a high level of structure into the counseling; not allowing for long silences (silences tend to feel longer over the telephone than in person); and frequent summarizations.

The career counseling program also incorporates written communications into its work with clients. Our career counselor must be skilled in the "art of sending e-mails" as well as delivering a thorough written report. Career counselors are trained to send written communications that help them to develop rapport with clients as well as to deliver information. The program has received feedback from a number of clients indicating the importance of these initial communications. For example, one client wrote, "Thank you for writing that email to me. It actually makes me feel like someone's listening!" Collie, Mitchell and Murphy (2000) and Boer (2001) provide a starting point for helping counselors learn how to communicate effectively and empathically with clients in cyberspace. Some suggestions include: making one's writing style more conversational and less formal, using emoticons [:)] to express emotion and convey playfulness, and using similes and metaphors when appropriate. ReadyMinds incorporates these concepts and others into its training program and materials.

Many of the concerns which beginning distance career counselors have focus on the lack of non-verbal communication. Clearly, clients and counselors are not able to examine or respond to body language and facial expressions. This reality requires adjustments by both counselor and client. Most counselors have been trained to attend to non-verbal cues and consider this skill to be an important tool in counseling. However, telecounseling research suggests that most counselors effectively adapt to the new media with less difficulty than expected (Rosenfield, 1997; Day & Schneider, 2000). In fact, our career counselors further support this finding and have indicated that they find themselves paying greater attention to voice tone, speed and inflection due to the lack of non-verbal cues. These fluctuations in style often provide them with information similar to that which they would obtain with non-verbal cues. They have also learned to be more explicit in checking out how clients are reacting at various points within the counseling session.

The technology associated with distance career counseling can sometimes be complicated. Our training manual has an entire section devoted to technology. During a telecounseling session, our career counselors are asked to turn off their call-waiting systems. However, only the party initiating the telephone call can turn off this system. Counseling sessions may be interrupted by call waiting on the client end. Using speakerphones or cordless

phones sometimes provide poor connections. Caller-ID presents a 21st century challenge to the cybercounselor.

Our career counselors must be willing to check e-mail daily since e-mail is the primary communication mechanism among our staff and clients. When servers are down or computers are being fixed, communications can be delayed. While it may seem that "lost in the mail" is an outdated term, occasionally e-mail messages get "lost in cyberspace." Most of our career counselors and clients find e-mail a quick and convenient way to communicate, but at times there are frustrations. For example, if a client doesn't respond to an e-mail, how does the counselor know whether the e-mail has been received and read? We suggest that all career counselors request "confirmation receipts" but not all e-mail systems are equipped to carry out this functionality, and there are ways in which clients can circumvent sending a receipt even if they have read the e-mail message.

The final outcome of the program is *Insight Into U™*. The intention behind the design of this electronically communicated counseling product is to provide clients with a personalized synthesis of their career development counseling process as experienced with their career counselor.

Insight Into U™ provides career assessment that is both informed by counselor commentary and linked to appropriate exploratory/research resources. It intends to offer both genuine support and meaningful motivation to clients in order to keep them committed to their own career development process. It was originally delivered in the form of an audiotape. However, in the interest of using effective technology to serve better counseling communication, *Insight Into U™* has evolved into a four page personalized format that is posted electronically on a client's *My ReadyMinds™ Website* page. Creating this document requires the career counselor to be skilled not only in written expression, but in word processing and other related computer skills. *Insight Into U™* is "published" to clients' *My ReadyMinds™ Website* page via series of technical directives from their career counselors' offices. Consequently, counselors need to have a computer system that is able to save documents as webtext as well as regular text.

Technology is an integral part of our program and it generally supports effective communication. It is important to hire counselors with an already advanced level of technical skill, but it is equally as necessary to have staff available to troubleshoot technology-related problems since it is often difficult to determine when technology issues reside with a specific computer, an Internet service provider, or human error.

Technology updates in our program are the norm rather than the exception. Currently, revisions are delivered via e-mail, but in the future

ReadyMinds will create a ReadyMinds staff listserv. This suggestion was made by various counselors during a training program and could serve as a more efficient way to quickly share information.

Career Counselor Supervision Model

The importance of supervision is acknowledged not only in maintaining the best possible quality of career counseling but also in providing support to our staff. Working in a distance model can be lonely and isolating, entailing similar problems with burnout that may occur when a counselor is working in private practice. Our supervisors have extensive career counseling experience and must have provided direct service to clients in the past. Currently, the Director and Assistant Director of Career Counseling (the first two authors of this chapter) provide supervision. We have developed supervision criteria that guide the counselor evaluation process. We continually evaluate the following skills and abilities: skilled handling of caseload, quality completion of all ReadyMinds written communication, delivering customer satisfaction, and maintaining timely and efficient communications with ReadyMinds.

Supervision in our program occurs via e-mail and telephone. Upon signing an agreement to become an independent contractor with ReadyMinds, counselors are asked to complete a "training case." This post-training supervision requirement emerged during the training of the second group of career counselors as we recognized the complexity of asking our counselors to organize their counseling ideas within our highly systematized and structured program. This process is similar to the one used in graduate counseling training programs. Career counselors are asked to recruit a volunteer client who will participate in all aspects of the program. This continuation of training gives our career counselors an opportunity to practice their skills in a supervised, low-pressure situation. There is a formal supervision protocol for the training case as well as for the first two actual clients. This supervision experience entails e-mail or telephone contact at various steps in the process. In general, in unambiguous situations or when disseminating information, e-mail is the preferred contact method. However, when either the supervisor or the career counselor feels an issue requires discussion, the telephone is the appropriate contact mechanism. After the first two client cases have been completed, career counselors can request supervision at any time during their course of career counseling with clients. Quarterly, supervisors may select client cases for review, and written documents will be reviewed for form and content on a random or as-needed basis. Formal performance evaluations take place semi-annually.

On-going supervision needs have varied depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the career counselor. The following list describes the main issues which have occurred in Ready Minds distance supervision: Does this client need personal counseling in addition to career counseling; Assistance with communication styles (reticent or very talkative); How to handle clients who miss scheduled appointments; Editing written documents; and Obtaining reputable resources for unusual career paths. ReadyMinds Supervisors have found that the majority of supervision issues are typically related to this "new counseling format." Our career counselors are highly skilled in their area of expertise. However, few of them have been called upon to provide either telecounseling or extensive written communications as part of their previous employment. Most of our career counselors adapt easily and quickly to the use of the telephone. However, counselors have encountered more difficulty in the challenge of quickly preparing lengthy written documents. While in the past career counselors may have kept private counseling notes or had to prepare brief reports, the ReadyMinds Process entails regular on-going written communications. Consequently, at the beginning of career counselors' tenure with ReadyMinds, supervisors may spend more time editing and revising written documents until the career counselor becomes more skilled and at ease with this new task. Occasionally, there are more difficult or complicated cases that require supervision. Generally, these cases are handled on an individual basis. However, recognizing that many common problematic situations will arise more than once in the course of our program, we have outlined in the training manual a series of difficult counseling scenarios along with potential response strategies.

Directions/implications for future practice and research in supervision will emerge over time. Currently, our career counselors appropriately request supervision when they encounter challenging or unusual cases. Counselors know they can access supervision within a 24-hour timeframe. As previously mentioned in the section on distance counseling, the implementation of a listserv may further promote on-going supervision.

Resolution and Solution of Difficult Counseling Situations

The Training Program and Counselor Training Manual are designed to help our career counselors be prepared for and aware of some common problematic situations which may arise during career counseling. Additionally, there are certain clinical emergency situations that rarely emerge, but require immediate intervention. Most agencies have emergency protocols to follow and ReadyMinds has taken care to prepare a suicide/

homicide/harm to others intervention plan which can be effectively used in a distance counseling model.

The most common difficult situation occurs when a client fails to make contact with our career counselor. In this case, the client has fully registered for the program, but either doesn't respond to e-mails to set up counseling appointments or the client isn't available at the time of a scheduled counseling appointment. Counseling organizations have different philosophies and policies on handling "no-shows." We request that counselors make two attempts at establishing contact before contacting a supervisor. Contact failures are frustrating but may be the result of a variety of factors including: low motivation, technology, or a poor understanding of how our program operates. Taking these and other individual factors into account, a supervisor may direct a career counselor to re-attempt contact or may request a follow-up communication from corporate offices.

Other examples of difficult situations include: a client's counseling needs being more clinical than we can address, a client is dissatisfied with the career counselor, or a client's parent makes an inquiry or complaint. In each instance, we have a response strategy that usually involves a supervisor in the decision-making process. All difficult situations and supervisory contacts are documented on our career counseling forms.

One of the most challenging counseling events occurs when a client expresses suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans. When a counselor works within an institutional or agency setting, there are usually colleagues to call upon for a second opinion as well as security officers to assist with management. However, in the world of distance counseling a counselor needs to be well prepared to assess the severity of the problem quickly and skillfully. Since all our career counselors have national certification, it is expected that they have a general understanding of crisis intervention. In addition, we have prepared an intervention plan that assists the career counselor in deciding how to handle a client presenting an emergency situation. We provide career counseling and in our code of ethics it clearly states that our counseling is "not designed to assess or treat clinical issues." Consequently, this situation is not likely to arise but we want our counselors to be prepared for any eventuality. As in most crisis situations, it is imperative to protect the health and safety of the client and other individuals if there is a strong probability of harm to self or another. As part of the preparatory work ReadyMinds career counselors obtain telephone numbers for the university counseling center and campus security when working with a university student. This preparation is crucial when managing a crisis situation. When working with an alumni or a client who is not on a university campus, obtaining numbers for local emergency services can be

more of a challenge. Our career counselors are provided with a national "1-800" crisis hotline number as part of their training.

ReadyMinds has not encountered a large number of difficult situations. However, it is important to keep track of the problematic scenarios that emerge in distance counseling because these will influence future program design and development. For example, it has been suggested that college career counselors may tend to refer very difficult cases to our program. ReadyMinds may not be qualified to work with every client that enters our virtual doors. How do we sensitively and ethically refer clients to more appropriate services when necessary? Do we risk alienating our referral sources when we don't accept all clients? ReadyMinds will face challenges in balancing client and corporate needs as it expands and grows.

Program Evaluation, Client Satisfaction and Counselor Feedback

During the summer of 1998 the director and assistant director conducted a pilot study and action plan delivery of our model, as it existed at the time. While the model has changed to some extent in both content and delivery since then, this initial study established and set the standard for seeking as well as measuring client satisfaction. We sought then, and continue to seek now both quantitative and qualitative responses to very specific questions about the content of our program and the helping efficacy of our counselors. Our vehicle for obtaining this valuable feedback is a 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire that solicits measured responses about the effectiveness of all ReadyMinds program components. It also asks for responses to evaluate career counselor behavior. In addition, the questionnaire provides space for qualitative statements from clients that address helpful and effective aspects of the program or any areas in need of improvement. Initially, these questionnaires were sent and returned through the U.S. mail. In the last few months, these questionnaires have been placed on-line and are filled out electronically and anonymously by clients after they receive their career counseling summary (*Insight Into U™*).

Many clients have made generous and enthusiastic comments about the effectiveness of the program. A thematic analysis of these written evaluations suggests our clients enjoy the following benefits:

- Career counselors take their time to really become acquainted with their clients and their needs.
- The written surveys and career assessment resources are very effective in providing the career counselor with "up-front" information about the client.

- The career counseling process is convenient and friendly in an informal way. Yet, it is systematic and structured enough to be very effective in helping clients to reach their goals.
- The web-based communication and written action plans are helpful in understanding the results of the career counseling sessions.
- The program helps clients to translate their self-assessment information into concrete career fields.
- Career counselors provide genuine support in the process.

Here are some actual testimonial comments offered from our clients:

Jeff Dolan, Senior - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, July 2001

"I definitely enjoyed my experience with ReadyMinds. It not only was convenient and casual, but also focused me on my career goals and helped me understand more about what I value in a career. I would highly recommend the program to any student or professional seeking his/her next step in his/her career. The counselors were all eager to help and give insightful advice, as well as encouragement. The web site (Insight Into U) that summarized our conversations was one of the greatest parts of the program. Thanks for a great experience, and I will look forward to carrying out the plan I laid out with my ReadyMinds Counselor."

Marcela Sabino, Junior - Amherst College, March 2001

"It was helpful to talk to a 'real counselor' who knew a lot about the college process and up-to-date information. I really have to emphasize the accessibility and the easygoing character of my counselor."

McCord Fitzsimmons, Sophomore - Rutgers University, February 2001

"The ReadyMinds process is a relatively painless one. ReadyMinds begins with registration on their website. The entire online information gathering session takes about 45 minutes. ReadyMinds counselors are extremely flexible in meeting the demands of often time's hectic student schedules. ReadyMinds counselors are available in the evening and even on the weekends. This turned out to be very convenient in my own personal experience with this service.

My personalized counselor called my dorm room and we discussed my own career goals, as well as my career concerns. We also discussed interviewing techniques, as well as job hunting strategies. Throughout the

entire process, I found my counselor to be helpful, understanding, and genuinely caring toward my particular circumstances."

Lashawndra Price, Graduate Student - The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, January 2001

"I think the program was very good. I think it is especially good for someone who can't meet during traditional office hours. I spoke with my counselor at times when school was closed (after Thanksgiving and just before Christmas). This could not have happened if I had been only using UCS (career services) on campus. I also feel that the program, ..., did very well helping me, a graduate student looking to transition out of the academy. I felt comfortable with my counselor and with the advice and suggestions she gave me. The program that they offer is stellar. The feedback that they provided through Insight Into U™ and appropriate website links were great too. Overall, this program is really great and I would highly recommend it to graduate students and undergraduates."

Rachel Daniels, Senior - The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, January 2001

For me, the most helpful part about ReadyMinds was that my counselor was able to give me suggestions for 5 or 6 types of careers I never even knew existed. I am in the process now of investigating those, and though I haven't reached a decision yet about what to do next year, I feel like whatever choice I make will be a much wiser one than I would have made on my own."

Shamel Farley, Junior – Cornell University, August 2000

"Before I joined the ReadyMinds Program, I knew I wanted to become a lawyer. But what fields of law I wanted to enter was undecided. Along the course of the program, I was able to do some research on the different areas of law. I have now narrowed down my choices. Another aspect of the program dealt with looking at my strengths and weaknesses. It is truly amazing to look at your strengths and to be able to pinpoint the weaknesses and work on them."

In some cases clients have pointed out perceived shortcomings within the program. These usually center on the desire to have had a greater amount of time, more than the 120 minutes, for career counseling. In all cases when counselors or supervisors become aware of any instance of client dissatisfaction, we examine the issues and strategize to make any possible improvements.

During supervision and at regular intervals, the director and assistant director of career counseling seek feedback commentary from our counselors. We want to know what issues they are facing, how adequately their training prepared them for delivering distance career counseling and what contribution their experiences may offer to new or other practitioners of cybercounseling. It is revealing to find out how many issues and difficulties associated with face to face counseling also occur in cybercounseling relationships. Here are some selective and informative voices from the field:

- "Cybercounseling is an active, evolving process and, even though our guidelines are well outlined, surprises happen."
- "Ongoing case supervision is invaluable to the cybercounselor... I foresee continuing supervisory contact because it fosters my own growth and development as a counselor."
- "Although initially it seems unusual not having face-to-face contact with a client and therefore missing out on the 'non verbal' component of communication, it is a type of counseling one can certainly become comfortable with."
- "Naturally there are sometimes unavoidable technical obstacles that get in the way."
- "It is easy for our clients to avoid appointments, as well as not follow through with mutually agreed to tasks. They can decide to not answer e-mails or skip phone appointments."
- "With regard to supervision...there has been abundant support. I have always felt confident that when situations arise, ...I get a prompt reply by e-mail and/or phone."

We also have formed a very interesting and unanticipated impression with respect to the relationship between clarity of communication and clarity of counseling as a result of our *Distance Career Counseling Model*. The focus of this new awareness has to do with the differences between the spoken and the written word. Several of our counselors have pointed out that their clients appear to be more self-aware and in touch with the specificity of their career counseling needs than face-to-face clients, perhaps resulting from completing a fairly extensive questionnaire at the beginning of their counseling experience. In like manner, our counselors read sometimes very extensive self-disclosures from these documents. As a result of organizing in-depth counseling notes and crafting a detailed counseling summary in writing, our counselors frequently feel there is more examination of and reflection upon counseling dynamics, strategies and

outcomes. Is it possible that cybercounseling and other forms of distance counseling are in some ways increasing the concreteness and specificity of the counseling process due to the more intense relationship among the communication dynamics of speaking, reflective thinking and writing. Is the power of the written word, even in its electronic expression, compensating in some ways for what is lost in comparison with traditional face-to face counseling?

Summary and Conclusion

Hopefully this chapter has provided insight, inspiration and encouragement to counselors, institutions, and other organizations that are interested in or already practicing some form of distance/cybercounseling. ReadyMinds has worked hard to create and deliver a high quality program for its clients and the following aspects of our program deserve highlighting:

- Structured and systematized distance career counseling model
- Focuses on personalization and relationship building
- Provides flexible, private, and convenient services
- Leads to the creative use of counseling technology
- Adheres to ethical and legal guidelines and ensures confidentiality
- Fosters motivation and attainment of career counseling goals

In developing the ReadyMinds *Career Counseling Program*, teamwork has been a guiding principle. In a project such as ours, counseling intersects with technology and business. Where contradictory ideas occur, we have found that our thoughts and actions are continuously directed towards what is most beneficial to our clients. We intend to continue playing a vital and meaningful role in the continued development of systematic career guidance and distance career counseling.

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